



Tapping into energy of Older Americans

By Janet Edwards

IN FLORIDA, retired health-care professionals volunteer two days a week in a free clinic to serve underinsured patients. Once a year, older adults with recreational vehicles organize to help Habitat for

“demands” is not too strong a word — ongoing productive roles in mainstream society.

Religious institutions, hospitals, schools, businesses, civic organizations, social services, and government agencies are only just waking up to this army of sure-footed and capable older adults anxious to make a difference. Program directors across the country are looking to capitalize on this windfall and provide win-win experiences for both older adults and the

change current opportunities so they are attractive to older adults and baby boomers?” Morrow-Howell says.

Benefits
The deployment of baby boomers into service work could have a positive effect

Healthier, wealthier, and better educated, this new generation of older adults seeks — perhaps “demands” — ongoing productive roles in mainstream society.

Humanity volunteers construct homes. Throughout the country, elder reading mentors meet weekly with school children to improve student literacy.

Welcome to the new era of “Productive Aging.”
As the first wave of baby boomers turns 60 this year, the typical retirement scenario of softening 60-somethings retreating into a vacation-like vacuum is passé. Healthier, wealthier, and better educated, this new generation of older adults seeks — perhaps

“The whole productive aging argument is that we’re picking up 20 to 30 years after we leave our careers, and people want to stay engaged. The way we stay engaged might take on a different form or shape, but we want to stay involved in activities our society views as productive,” says Nancy Morrow-Howell, the Ralph and Muriel Pumphrey Professor of Social Work and nationally recognized expert in gerontology.

Key word: Service
Productive engagement involves working, volunteering, or care-giving she says, all of which point to one important word — service.

agencies they choose to serve. How can institutions effectively entice this fresh face of aging?

With a grant from MetLife Foundation, Morrow-Howell is hoping to provide some clues. Her nationwide study seeks to identify crucial elements that define successful elder service opportunities. “Many organizations recognize that older adults don’t want to do the same thing they’ve been doing, they want to achieve a balance between leisure and being meaningfully involved. The big question is, how can we

on the economy, she says, pointing out that along with filling a need for caregivers and workers, we can ease the strain on Social Security by keeping people on the payroll longer, improve our efforts to retrain, and address mobility problems through new technologies.

Equally important, older adult volunteers often report both physical and mental improvements as a result of being involved.

“There are multiple levels of benefits for everyone concerned, that’s the main attraction,” Morrow-Howell says. “With that in mind, we want to understand how to



Amy Luman and Nancy Morrow-Howell

Photo by Geoff Story

The alternate perspective gained by students working on this project, she says, enables them to more accurately visualize a picture of later life and helps to destroy harmful stereotypes about aging. In addition, the student assistants contribute to meaningful discussions on elder program innovations, innovations which may very well impact their own aging experience, Morrow-Howell says.

At age 26, Jaime Goldberg is concentrating her graduate studies in gerontology.

Here are people who have expertise and talent, a lot of training, and time on their hands. And once they commit to something, they are really committed — usually for five to 10 years, every week. These older adults are not transitional in any way.”

Graduate student Amy Luman has previous experience working in a guardianship program for older adults. Many of the clients suffered from late-stage Alzheimer’s disease and were more likely to be 80 years old than 60, she says.

should encourage volunteerism in younger years to establish the pattern and continue to offer meaningful opportunities to serve the community throughout the life course,” Morrow-Howell says.

As a delegate to the 2005 White House Conference on Aging, Morrow-Howell suggested that, along with providing a wider array of choices for service work, agencies need to increase access to programs, offer skill development, especially computer training, and

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build the capacity to engage older adults, and how to help society give older people more opportunity to make significant contributions.”

Graduate students help

Graduate students assist Morrow-Howell in gathering the study data. “For most students, the topic of gerontology has been about the hard part — the ‘Three D’s’ of depression, dementia, and disability,” Morrow-Howell says. “That knowledge is important but ignores the fact that 80 percent of older adults don’t fit those bills.”

Goldberg’s initial charge was to interview program directors and older adult volunteers. She is now summarizing the findings and preparing a report to send to the program directors who contributed data.

At the same time, Goldberg continues her longtime volunteerism in a hospice program, earning practicum credit for her work.

“This research is a good balance for me between end-of-life care and very productive, very engaged older adults in the community,” Goldberg says. “This is such an untapped resource in America.

“The other side of aging is of interest to me because we look at 65-year-olds who are retiring and don’t want to,” Luman says. Luman interviewed older adult volunteers and is helping to write the report that will be distributed to the 50 programs contacted for the MetLife Project.

“The description gives them an opportunity to compare their programs, such as what incentives are offered, or how much training other programs provide to older adults,” Luman said.

Morrow-Howell hopes current research bears prodigious fruits. “We

identify relevant incentives for older adults (why not expand tax breaks for care-giving, or the ability to transfer educational incentives designed for younger volunteers to grandchildren?).

The good news is that the concept of productive aging is gaining a foothold in the American psyche.

“It’s on everybody’s radar screen. It’s certainly something that is very popular now because the changing demography is finally sinking in,” Morrow-Howell says. ☞